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Twenty instructors from eight junior college districts, meeting at a workshop sponsored by the League for Innovation in the Community College, developed this research paradigm for teachers of English composition in 2-year colleges. A systematic method of inquiry is described first, including (1) the rationale for deliberate inquiry, (2) methods of selection for instructors and classes to participate in the study, (3) the development of a scoring key for composition, (4) checking the reliability of raters who will use the key, (5) choosing composition topics, and (6) instructions to give participating students. The implementation of the study is outlined next, including procedures for (1) coordinating the study, (2) administering the composition test, (3) coding and sampling, (4) distributing the compositions for scoring, (5) scoring the compositions, and (6) collating the results. Analysis of the data is then discussed, and includes several questions that such an analysis could answer. The final discussion reviews the strengths and weaknesses of the design, and some of the implications of this type of inquiry for curriculum and instruction. (MC)

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## INTRODUCTION

The research paradigm outlined in this Topical Paper was designed (and is for use) by teachers of English Composition in two-year colleges. Twenty instructors from eight junior college districts met at a workshop sponsored by the League for Innovation in the Community College in July, 1968, and developed these guidelines. A study using the design is being coordinated by the Clearinghouse. Results will be reported in a later paper in this series or in a Clearinghouse monograph.

We hope that a large number of teachers of English will be so concerned with their students' learning to write that they will set up projects along the lines projected here. Groups wishing to employ the design in their own studies may receive further information from the Clearinghouse.

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# IS ANYONE LEARNING TO WRITE?

## Introduction

Does anyone learn to write in college? How would one go about seeking pertinent data? Ask the instructors? Search the dean's files? Poll the students or check their grade point averages?

All available answers suffer from limitations occasioned by bias, distorted perception, and, above all, inadequate available information. Grade marks earned in freshman composition courses, for example, say little about writing ability. Classes may be based on traditional grammar, structural linguistics, literature, rhetoric, logic, semantics, communication in the mass media, public speaking, or on any combination thereof (5). In some cases instruction and practice in writing are not included in the course at all and marks assigned are related instead to verbal performance, responses to quick score exams, or facility in classroom discussion.

Other sources shed no light whatsoever on the question of student learning. Deans' files typically include data on numbers of students who transfer to four year institutions and the grades they earn. When students and instructors are queried, their answers are usually, "I feel I learned to write" and "I think our students are writing better now than they were when they enrolled." The extent to which the questioner is satisfied with those types of responses depends upon his faith in the accuracy of student memory and instructor perception.

In short, despite the notation in every college catalog, "The student will learn to write effectively," no one really knows the extent to which student writing improves, or if, in fact, it improves at all as a result of college attendance. He who would seek an answer must design and conduct his own investigation.

The prime requisite for such a study is a deliberate method of inquiry that must be built on a composition scoring device.

**Rationale**

This design stems from certain definitions and philosophical positions regarding education. The overriding position is that education is a process of moving people from one set of capabilities or tendencies to another. Within this framework are certain definitions; e.g., learning is changed capability for, or tendency toward, acting in particular ways; and instruction is the deliberate sequencing of events so that learning occurs. Thus, education is not seen as the providing of an environment in which something of unknown effect may or may not occur; rather, education is the bringing about of change. Within the community college, it is the instructors who should predict and define the nature of that change and assess the effects of their instructional processes.

I. **Selecting the Participants**

All instructors of English composition are eligible. Several members of one department may be involved; the more who participate, the better the study. The design works equally well when instructors from more than one college take part.

II. **Selecting the Classes**

Each participating instructor may involve as many students as he chooses. He may bring one or any number of his classes into the project.

III. **Developing A Scoring Key**

Although composition scoring keys are readily available, none should be selected unless all participants understand and are willing to use all categories (an unlikely eventuality). Agreement is more readily achieved if the instructors meet together and develop their own key. In developing the key, some instructors may be forced to give up favored viewpoints in order to achieve a group consensus.

Any key that is used should be built on separate scoring categories

rather than on single global measures. There may be as many categories as is deemed necessary.

For scoring ease it is desirable that categories be dichotomous, for example:

1. There are serious or distracting errors in punctuation. Yes No

2. Each paragraph is developed with supporting details. Yes No

It should be noted that for some categories in the scoring key, the "correct" answer is "No", as in example one above, and for some it may be, "Yes", as in example two.

IV. Checking Rater Reliability

In the course of developing the key, scoring reliability is checked by having each participant read and mark duplicate compositions. A category consistently failing to receive 80 percent agreement should be refined or discarded. That is, if four of five participants cannot agree on the meaning of terms as applied to sample compositions ("insightful," "well developed," "excessive errors in ...."), the wording of that category must be changed. If repeated trials using other composition samples do not bring near consensus, the category must be discarded.

V. Choosing the Topics

The participants select a pair of topics on which students will write. Two similar topics are needed because the design requires one "before" and one "after" composition from each student. Certain topics must be avoided, for example, those that invite triteness ("What are a student's [teacher's] obligations to his school?") and those that are biased against students who prefer not to reveal personal matters ("What are your inmost fears [hopes]?") or who may not believe the statement ("To what extent are parents [children] responsible for the generation gap?"). Rhetorical devices should not be

prescribed because "compare and contrast" or "analyze and discuss" may be variously interpreted.

VI. Instructions to Students

Instructions can be kept to a minimum because the only really important limitation on the student is the time he spends in writing the composition. Simply distributing bluebooks with the printed directive, "Write a composition on the topic.... You have 50 minutes," is actually sufficient for purposes of the study. Other directives may be employed ("Write on one side of the paper only." "Use blue ink.") but care should be taken that they do not confuse the student or bias the results. Data on individual students may be gathered by means of a self-report form [Figure 1].

## Implementing the Study

I. Co-ordinating the Study

The participants may select any outsider such as the college research director or a departmental secretary as project coordinator responsible for preparing the bluebooks and distributing them to the participants. He also collects and codes the compositions after they have been written.

II. Administering the Compositions

During the first week of his course, each participating instructor randomly distributes to his class or classes a number of bluebooks with the notation, "Write on topic 'X'" and an equivalent number that say "Write on topic 'Q'". After the students write on the designated topics, the bluebooks are collected and sent to the coordinator along with a cover letter noting pertinent data about each class. [Figure 2.]

At the end of the course, each student receives a bluebook with his name and the directive, "Write on topic 'X'" (if he previously wrote on 'Q')

Code Number_____
(LEAVE BLANK)

INSTRUCTIONS TO STUDENT

1. Fill in the form below:

Name_____
LAST NAME FIRST NAME MIDDLE INITIAL

School_____

Course_____

Date_____

Sex: Male____ Female____

Have you a high school diploma? _____ _____
Yes No

Have you attended any college prior to this term? _____ _____
Yes No

Your age: (Check one)

| under 17 | 17 | 18 | 19 | 20 | 21 | 22 | 23-26 | 27-30 | 31-35 | 36 |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| _____ | _____ | _____ | _____ | _____ | _____ | _____ | _____ | _____ | _____ | _____ |

2. Write a composition in this bluebook.

Write in ink on one side of the page only.

Write on alternate lines.

You are to write on the topic: (to be selected by participating instructors)

FIGURE 1

CLASS INFORMATION SHEET

TEACHER: PLEASE COMPLETE AND ENCLOSE ONE COPY OF THIS FORM FOR EACH CLASS:

YOUR NAME _____

WHAT IS THE LEVEL OF THIS CLASS?

(English 1 - first semester freshman reading and composition, )
(see below, at Superior College. This is the highest of three)
(tracks. )

WHAT SCREENING PROCEDURES AND CRITERIA WERE USED TO PLACE STUDENTS IN THIS CLASS?

(SCAT test - Student must have scored in the 50th percentile )
(or above. )

FIGURE 2

or "Write on topic 'Q' (if he previously wrote on 'X')". Thus, each student writes on both topics, preparing one composition before instruction begins, the other at the end of the course.

III. Coding

The coordinator removes all identifying marks from each composition. He enters its author's name on a list and assigns a code number to it. Code numbers are recorded on a master sheet. Care must be taken that numbers do not reveal the time when -- or by whom -- the composition was written.

IV. Sampling

Sampling is desirable if the total number of compositions to be scored exceeds 60 per participating instructor (30 written "before" and 30 "after" instruction). If the sampling procedure is used, a number of "before" compositions are drawn at random. After all compositions have been collected, only those written by students in the sample group are kept; the others are discarded. Size of the sample will vary but it should include not fewer than one-third the compositions from a single class.

V. Distributing the Compositions for Scoring

The number of compositions scored by each participating instructor depends on the total number of participants. For example, if there are 60 compositions in the sample and 2 participants, each scores 30; if there are 100 compositions and 5 participants, each scores 20.

When the compositions are ready to be scored, they are stacked according to the class in which they were written. "Before" and "after" compositions are mixed together. A number is drawn from each stack in a manner that each participating instructor gets an approximately equivalent number to score from each class.

VI. Scoring

Each participant scores the compositions as distributed by the coordinator. He follows the key that he had earlier helped develop. A separate scoring sheet based upon the key is used for each composition. [Figure 3.]

VII. Collating Results

Score sheets are collected and tallied [See Figure 4] . For each student and for classes, the data sheet should include room for other pertinent information such as student's prior grade point average, age, etc. depending on the questions to be asked of the data. Hand tabulation is sufficient for most purposes; that is, computer analyses are not necessary.

Analyzing the Data

Individual scores on the first composition only can answer questions such as:

1) Is there any relationship between a student's ability to write at entrance and his first term grade point average?

2) To what extent do English placement procedures actually relate to writing ability?

3) To what extent is writing ability related to scores made on entrance examinations or intelligence tests?

4) Do students who score low in any one area tend to score low in every area (content, organization, mechanics)?

5) Is there any relationship between a student's writing ability and his persistence to the end of the course?

Comparison of group means can answer questions such as:

6) In what ways do students enrolled in "remedial" courses write differently from those enrolled in "regular" college courses?

7) Is the ability to write related to students' indicated choices of academic majors?

8) In what ways does writing compare between the same level classes

NOTE: This scoring key has been reproduced to show format only. Each group of instructors should develop its own key and its own categories.

SCORE SHEET

| | YES | NO | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Content I. | ___ | ___ | 1. | Ideas themselves are insightful. |
| | ___ | ___ | 2. | Ideas are creative or original |
| | ___ | ___ | 3. | Ideas are rational or logical. |
| | ___ | ___ | 4. | Ideas are expressed with clarity. |
| Organization II. | ___ | ___ | 5. | There is a thesis. |
| | ___ | ___ | 6. | Order of thesis idea is followed throughout the essay. |
| | ___ | ___ | 7. | Thesis is adequately developed. |
| | ___ | ___ | 8. | Every paragraph is relevant to the thesis. |
| | ___ | ___ | 9. | Each paragraph has a controlling idea. |
| | ___ | ___ | 10. | Each paragraph is developed with relevant and concrete details. |
| | ___ | ___ | 11. | The details that are included are well ordered. |
| Mechanics III. | ___ | ___ | 12. | There are many misspellings. |
| | ___ | ___ | 13. | There are serious punctuation errors. |
| | ___ | ___ | 14. | Punctuation errors are excessive. |
| | ___ | ___ | 15. | There are errors in use of verbs. |
| | ___ | ___ | 16. | There are errors in use of pronouns. |
| | ___ | ___ | 17. | There are errors in use of modifiers. |
| | ___ | ___ | 18. | There are distracting errors in word usage. |
| | ___ | ___ | 19. | The sentences are awkward. |

CODE NO. _____

FIGURE 3

NOTE: This scoring key has been reproduced to show format only. Each group of instructors should develop its own key and its own categories.

FIGURE 4. Tally sheet for student gain on 19 rating scale items.

(See Figure 3 for the items.)

College: Superior Community College  Instructional Period: Fall, 1968

Class Level: Honors English  Instructor: Jane Doe

Student Achievement on each criterion item:

1 = Achieved  0 = Not Achieved

| | Item Number | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Student Name | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | 7 | 8 | 9 | 10 | 11 | 12 | 13 | 14 | 15 | 16 | 17 | 18 | 19 | |
| Smith | 1 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 1 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 1 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 1 | 0 | 0 | 0 | Pre-test |
| | 1 | 1 | 0 | 1 | 1 | 1 | 1 | 0 | 0 | 1 | 1 | 1 | 0 | 1 | 1 | 1 | 0 | 1 | 1 | Post-tes |
| Jones | 0 | 0 | 0 | 1 | 0 | 1 | 1 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 1 | 0 | 1 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | Pre-test |
| | 0 | 0 | 1 | 1 | 1 | 1 | 1 | 0 | 0 | 1 | 1 | 0 | 1 | 0 | 1 | 1 | 0 | 1 | 1 | Post-tes |
| Brown | 0 | 1 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 1 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 1 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 1 | 1 | 0 | Pre-test |
| | 0 | 1 | 1 | 1 | 0 | 0 | 1 | 0 | 1 | 1 | 0 | 1 | 1 | 1 | 0 | 0 | 1 | 1 | 1 | Post-tes |
| Moore | 0 | 1 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 1 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 1 | 1 | 0 | 0 | 0 | Pre-test |
| | 1 | 1 | 1 | 0 | 1 | 1 | 1 | 0 | 1 | 1 | 1 | 0 | 1 | 0 | 0 | 1 | 0 | 1 | 1 | Post-tes |
| | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | |
| *Sample Totals: | 1 | 2 | 0 | 1 | 0 | 3 | 2 | 0 | 0 | 1 | 1 | 0 | 1 | 0 | 2 | 2 | 1 | 1 | 0 | Pre-test |
| | 2 | 3 | 3 | 3 | 3 | 3 | 4 | 0 | 2 | 4 | 3 | 2 | 3 | 2 | 2 | 3 | 1 | 4 | 1 | Post-tes |

*Sample totals show the number of students who have achieved mastery of each criterion item from pre- to post-test.

in the same school? In different schools (if instructors from more than one institution are involved)?

Comparison of change scores can be used to answer:

9) How much does student writing improve from the beginning to the end of a course as indicated by the two compositions?

10) What kinds of improvement are made?

11) Do "remedial" courses remedy certain types of writing deficiencies?

12) Can change in student writing be traced to different instructional procedures employed in one or another course section

In the sample tally sheet reproduced in Figure 4, Miss Doe's Honors English Class of four students wrote the essays as directed. She wanted an answer to Question 10: What kinds of improvement are made?

Results showed that her students did not improve their ability to make paragraphs relevant (Category No. 8 on the Score Sheet) or to avoid errors in the use of modifiers (Category No. 17). However, they showed gain in many categories, particularly their ability to make ideas rational (No. 3), state a thesis (No. 5), develop each paragraph (No. 10), and avoid errors in word usage (No. 18). Thus, she is aware of the types of improvement made by her students and can modify her instruction accordingly. She and her colleagues may answer several other questions by checking the tally sheets against grade marks, entrance exams, and so on.

## Discussion

Implications of using the writing samples to answer those types of questions seem obvious. For one thing, changes in curricular emphases or instructional procedures may be undertaken and the study repeated to determine if "innovation" is in fact effectual. When reliable data on student gain in writing ability are produced, questions regarding the relative value of traditional grammar, structural linguistics, and other course emphases may be given a common referent.

And the worth of instructional procedures such as writing laboratories may be assessed according to the degree of improvement that appears in student writing. A faculty that would prepare instructional sequences for reducing student writing deficiencies could likely think of many other uses to which the design can be used to advantage.

The two most important characteristics of the design itself are 1) it provides for multiple blind scoring and 2) categories on which compositions are scored are developed by the participants. The reason for having had the students write on topic 'X' at the beginning and on 'Q' at the end (and vice versa) is that when participating instructors score the compositions, they must not know whether the sample they are reading was written early or late. In that way, unintentional biases such as, "You can't expect a beginning student to know that" and "He should have learned that in the course" are mitigated. The design provides for blind scoring not only in terms of students' names and classes but also in point of time when the paper was written. Without a blind scoring feature, any design that depends on "subjective judgment (as it must if a composition scoring device is to be accepted by a faculty)" suffers. Another value of this design is that assigning papers for many classes to be read by many scorers allows each paper to be read but once while distributing the influence of any single reader.

The fact that the scoring key is developed by the participants is no less significant. The worth of any scheme is lessened to the extent instructors fail to understand or to agree with the categories suggested. When participants build their own device, try it out and revise it so that misunderstandings are lessened, the tool becomes much more useful. The degree of confidence one wishes to place in the findings is directly related to the extent to which he accepts the whole group's ability to judge compositions accurately.

A single English department may wish to use the design for purposes of intragroup comparison of instructional effect or for use in suggesting student placement in courses. In that case all members of the department would participate in developing the scoring key which could be built in a couple of two hour meetings. If the group of participants were larger than a single department, some form of conference or workshop covering a day or two would have to be arranged. It is likely that a period of time is required to bring simplest understanding of words used when people previously unknown to each other are brought together. The farther members of the group are away from each other in terms of departmental or institutional affiliation, the longer the time required to develop the scoring key. Members of a single department often know -- although they may not agree with -- what their fellows mean when they use particular terms.

The scoring key should be based on a large number of categories so that each point of inclusion can be assessed on an "either/or" or "yes/no" basis. If few categories are used, the tendency will be to scale quality of response on an "always/sometimes/never" basis or on a five point scale. However, such scaling makes scoring more complex, and, most important, lends little direction to the way instructional procedures might be modified to overcome discerned deficiencies.

Composition scoring designs have never been popular. This is due in large measure to the field's continued acceptance of standards that shift in accordance with any instructor's whims -- a pernicious interpretation of "academic freedom" -- and to a persistent belief that ones own assessment of his students' writing is the only worthy measure. Many instructors do not agree with their colleagues even on criteria to be employed in viewing students' work, let alone on their evaluations of it. Too, the idea of "scoring" a composition is reprehensible to many even though they in fact do not hesitate to mark errors, make comments about

the worth of passages, and assign overall grade marks to student papers.

An English faculty that would improve its instructional procedures so that learning is effected can well employ a design such as the one promulgated here. It fails to shed light on the issue of how much a student's inner being has been affected by his college experience but it does provide one answer to the question, "Is anyone learning to write?"

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